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SUBJECT: BELARUS: NEW POLITICAL PARTY OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIL
SOCIETY, REGIME

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Summary -----

1. (SBU) The Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (BCDP) held its founding congress in the "Palace of Culture" of the Minsk Tractor Factory February 28. While strongly conservative -- and somewhat confrontational -- in its philosophical outlook, the BCDP is seen by civil society as an important new player. The GOB has shown willingness to make some gestures towards the Christian Democrats, and may be prepared to grant the party registration. End summary.

Background -----

2. (SBU) Building on the roots of a previous Christian democratic party first formed in 1917, the BCDP is headed by Paval Sevyarynets, former youth activist and founder in 1997 of the "Young Front" (Malady Front). Sevyarynets initially began the "Belarusian Christian Democracy" movement in March 2005. That movement has not been officially registered, and has not formally been a political party, although it did participate in the efforts of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) to form a single list of democratic opposition candidates for the September 2008 parliamentary elections. (Comment: Members did not reach consensus regarding calls for a boycott of the elections; Paval's mother Tatsyana Sevyarynets withdrew her candidacy, although other party colleagues did not, and Paval himself advocated participation. End comment.) The party platform includes a ban on abortions and strong calls for Belarus to remain sovereign.

Founding Congress -----

3. (SBU) The GOB first denied permission for the congress to take place but eventually approved the event and provided a venue. The hall was festooned with party symbols -- a blue "Bethlehem cross" on the traditional white-red-white national flag -- and packed with 206 voting participants as well as invited guests. Prominent Belarusians included former presidential candidates Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Alyaksandr Kazulin, United Civil Party chair Anatol Lyabedzka, Belarusian Social Democratic Party-National Gramada chair Mikhail Statkevich, opposition leader Mikhail Marinich, Malady Front leader Zmitser Dashkevich and Maladaya Belarus leader Artur Finkevich. Milinkevich, Kazulin, Lyabedzka, Statkevich, and Dashkevich were all given the floor. Foreign guests included some European Christian Democrats, the Swedish Ambassador, the Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk, mid-level diplomats from the French and Polish Embassies, and Charge. Sevyarynets read letters to the delegates from the Secretary General of the German CDU and other similar figures.

14. (SBU) The most honored guest, or at least certainly the most cited, was present only in spirit: references to God and Jesus Christ were frequent and deeply reverential. A few minutes' prayer figured several times in the program; speakers called on the attendees to answer every cry of "[Long] live Belarus!" by responding "Live with God!" Sending a somewhat more open message, BCDP leader Vital Rymasheuski helpfully pointed out that -- in contrast to its religious and patriotic trappings -- the BCDP was open to persons of all faiths. There was no reference to Belarus' extensive Jewish heritage; almost all speeches were in Belarusian.

15. (SBU) Dashkevich, like Kazulin a former political prisoner, sounded the most confrontational note in the opening session, proudly proclaiming "we will never work with Communists" and telling the attendees that "we should not be afraid to be nationalists." (Comment: Both sentiments play directly into the hands of the regime, which seeks to portray the democratic opposition as politically extreme. Dashkevich's remarks received significantly less applause, with UDF leaders such as Kazulin and Lyabedzka keeping silent after the youth leader's strongest pronouncements. The Belarusian Party of Communists continues to be an active partner in the UDF. End comment.)

16. (SBU) In discussions with Charge on the margins of the congress, a number of BCDP members expressed satisfaction and surprise that the GOB allowed the party's congress to be held at all, and voiced optimism that the regime would favorably respond to the party's request for registration. At the same time, party members reported that some of their colleagues had been harassed, in some cases threatened with dismissals, conscription and/or criminal liability, if they were to participate in the congress.

Comment

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17. (SBU) The BCDP is indeed a dynamic arrival on a political scene characterized by entrenched aQhidebound institutions, interests, and personalities; in the long term, it could be a useful platform for the 32-year-old Sevyarynets to build his national standing. The party clearly offers a political outlet for conservative Christians and Belarusian nationalists. As such, however, it directly excludes large segments of the population that view the Soviet past with nostalgia, have less interest in the Christian faith, or prefer more liberal social policies. The BCDP's most important task for now will be gaining broader sympathy for the human rights situation in Belarus by engaging with other Christian democratic parties in the EU.

Comment cont'd

18. (SBU) Separately, the optimism of BCDP members that their newly-founded party will win official sanction is not without foundation: a number of GOB officials, including editor-in-chief Pavel Yakubovich of the state-run "Sovetskaya Belarus" newspaper, have maintained privately that Sevyarynets is a good alternative to existing opposition leaders. While the motives for such a view deserve scrutiny, quick registration of the BCDP would be a further positive step towards greater liberalization of Belarusian society.

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